The Power of Touch
Mark 1:35-45
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Nobody touched a leper. Not the lawyers, not the Scribes, Pharises, Saducees, not the Priests nor the temple functionaries, not the rich people, the poor people, nor the people in between. Nobody touched a leper, except perhaps another leper. In fact, all over the ancient eastern world it was considered a very bad omen if the shadow of a leper happened to fall across one's own shadow.

When we think about leprosy in Biblical times, we must first discard the precise medical vocabularly which you and I have learned to use from watching the T.V. doctors practice their art. For here we are dealing with a strange combination of primitive medicine, superstition and mythology. Leprosy had its own mythology: it was the scourge of the ancient world, dreaded and feared by every culture. But it wasn't a very precise medical term. Actually the word leprosy was used to describe a long list of skin diseases which fills two full pages of the Interpreters' Dictionary of the Bible, few of which I can pronounce.

A man had leprosy when a priest said he did. It was the law that when any skin eruption occurred, any darkening of flesh, and discoloration of scalp or hair, a man went to a priest. The priest then called into play a very complex list of symptoms and prescribed therapeutic measures. At first a man might be given a seven day quarantine, at the end of which period the priest would examine him again and either extend the quarantine another seven days, declare him permanently a leper, or certify that he was clean.

It is interesting that we now know that some skin disorders may have emotional derivation. Therefore the person whose rash was a manifestation of stress or anxiety, well may have been healed by a ritual bathing in the Jordan River. In any case the word leprosy in the Bible, refers to a large number of different diseases, some very minor, some extremely severe including authentic leprosy, or Hansen's Disease as it is known today.

The significant thing about a leper, however, is that he was not only a sick

man; he was also an isolated, alienated, cruelly segregated, very lonely man. Leprosy was not only a medical ~~condition~~ illness. It was a ~~liturgical, legal and social phenomenon.~~ social condition.

Liturgically a leper had to be certified as a leper by a priest. Liturgically there were certain prescribed ritualistic bathing procedures. If his symptoms disappeared it was the priest, alone, who could certify that he was cured. And beneath it all was the liturgical concept of "uncleaness". A leper was unclean. He was unacceptable in the Temple or for any kind of social relationship. For the safety of the community, real or imagined, he was required to identify himself as a leper by wearing a certain type of baggy clothing, letting his hair hang loose, and by calling our "Unclean! Unclean!" whenever anyone else came near. He was required to live away from the community, the further the better, in a cave perhaps, or a shack outside the walls of the city. His livelihood was begging.

Legally he was the victim of one of the most deeply entrenched social taboos of the ancient world. It was against the law for him to come in contact with other people. It was equally illegal for others to initiate contact with him.

I've always wondered why lepers were not simply executed because the sociological results of their liturgical and legal predicament were often a fate far worse than death. They were totally detached from the mainstream; totally alientated, totally isolated, they mattered to no one. They represent one of the most pathetic images in human history. They were disgusting to look at, some of them without noses, or hands; they were, in fact, filthy with open, running sores. Nobody touched a leper. Who wanted to?

Well, Jesus touched a leper. And the fact that the touch had power to heal opens up a veritible reservoir of implications in the area of social taboo, social restrictions, legal segregation and so on. But, for our purposes this morning, I would have us channel the implications back on the act of touching. Jesus touched the man. No one else would have, or could have, but Jesus did.

The importance of that simple act is underscored by the fact that the vast majority of incidents involving healing in the New Testament, also involve Jesus

physically touching someone. Sometimes it was only his garment, as in the case of the old woman who reached out for his robe and was healed. The early Christians siezed on those occasions to prove the divinity of their Lord; even though Jesus himself apparently was not interested in being known as a miracle worker. The legitimate point of impact for us, therefore, is in this simple act of touching; what it meant; the power it transmitted.

We know a little about the power of touch. We know that an infant depends on physical touching for his life. We have learned that the odds on survival are greatly diminished if an infant is isolated and never touched. We know that there is a real need for fondling, caressing, physical intimacy - and that there is the power of life in touch. We know that without physical affection the infant will become an emotional cripple as an adult; perhaps incapable of any kind of open intimacy with anyone.

We know that, but we have some rather strange rules about touching in our culture. A man had better not touch a woman, other than his wife or sister, because it is simply assumed that something foul is intended. That, of course, is the reason why the whole concept of sensitivity training drives some people to distraction. Some sensitivity training involves touching; for instance the physical touching of the face of another person. That frightens us, and pathetically there are some who simply cannot imagine that happening apart from a sexual context.

For men, the social taboos are even more strange. Two women, good friends, may give each other a warm hug. But not two men. That is taboo. Russian men who are good friends hold hands, publically. But I wouldn't advise that in Lafayette. One of the incongruities of the taboo in our culture, however, is that it is lifted on the athletic field. Veno Paraskenas, Purdue's fine linebacker, before each play walks along the line and pats each 250 pound tackle - in a manner that would get him expelled from school were he to do it on campus.

Now, I am not, at this point, advocating anything. I have no need, no desire, to hold hands with anyone but my wife and children. What I am doing is pointing

to the strange taboos regarding touching that have evolved in this particular culture. We know the power of touch, -but as adults and we choose to express it negatively in most cases. The psychological disciplines tell us that our attitude reflects a neurotic insecurity about our own manhood or womanhood. Be that as it may, the cultural results, I believe, are a social neurosis about intimacy: about people touching each other physically or figuratively.

We've been programmed to think of ourselves as self-reliant. We've been conditioned to regard ourselves of bastions of strength. We don't need others: if we have problems, we'll take care of them. If we have deep feelings about anything we keep them to ourselves. We avoid the openness which allows others to get inside our lives, and we avoid projecting ourselves into anyone else's life, because, that, - given our neurotic insecurity - would be evidence of weakness.

That is a familiar refrain to anyone who works with people in a supportive, helping profession. I spend some time working with the Family Service Agency. The monthly case reports reflect a disproportionate number of women. And the reason for that is the patently absurd notion that for a man to admit to a personal or marital problem is to publically admit to weakness or unmanliness. That's a major social problem, and it will not be resolved until the image of the American male becomes more than the adolescent parody which it has become. Personally, we don't want to be touched - physically - or figuratively.

On a bit broader scale we are learning, many times by failure, that nothing replaces personal contact. A large, modern social service agency may perform its functions with speed and effeciency and help no one if it does not take into account personal contact. A modern clinic may incorporate the fantastic technology of medical science, but nothing replaces the hand of a concerned physician on the patients' arm. "Marcus Welby, M.D." is the current medical folk-hero because he has something that is increasingly rare - the "personal touch".

Jesus reached across the vast chasim of social taboo to touch a leper. The man was healed. Something happened. The walls came tumbling down. Let's call it reconciliation. The man got everything together: he became a whole man.

Who among us doesn't need that? Who ~~among us~~ man or woman has never felt quarantined and isolated, carrying a burden, worrying about a problem, certain that we are alone in the world? And then someone touched us. Someone broke through and for a miraculous moment shared that concern with us, and we were no longer alone. The problem is still there, but something important happened to us, and somehow the problem becomes manageable or the burden lighter. There is no one here who doesn't need that. And there is no greater goal for a church than for that kind of thing to be typical of the fellowship of Jesus Christ in this place.

We need to be touched, and our needs as individuals reflect the needs of people and groups of people in our community, nation and throughout the world. There are a lot of isolated, alienated, lonely and sometimes bitter people out there. We meet them every day. We work with them and live beside them and walk right by them. They need us -- as we need each other. The whole nation became very concerned with the plight of the Apollo 13 astronauts last week. And I think one of the reasons for this outpouring of concern was the fact that we sensed the terror of isolation. Lots of men die every day. Lots of young men were killed in Viet Nam while apollo was threading its hazhardous way home. But those men were isolated -- completely and totally. And we sensed the difference. We witnessed the power of touch.

Well there are a lot of people in life very much like those astronauts. Racially, socially, economically, politically isolated. There are a lot of people whose suffering repels us -- whose pathos moves us to walk on by. And their need must be at the top of our agenda -- as individual Christians, and specifically as a Church.

How to touch? How to break through? Who will make the first move? Theodore Park Ferris tells the story of a man watching a nun dressing the wounds of a leper. "The wounds were horrible, loathsome to look at. As he watched her, he said, 'I wouldn't do that for a million dollars.' She looked up at him and said,'I wouldn't either!' She was not doing it for a million dollars: she couldn't. She was doing it for someone else who had touched her and drawn her into the

circle of those who are always reaching out to bring others in." [The Things We Live By] p. 45, Parish of the Air]

Someone else has made the first move. In Jesus Christ God has reached across the chasim to touch the life of humanity. And the miracle of that is that in Jesus Christ he touches you and me. D.H. Lawrence - no Christian himself - saw the truth of Gospel in one of his last poems when he said, "The future of religion lies in the mystery of touch."

The goodness of the Gospel is the power of God's touch in Jesus Christ. And that goodness is shared and celebrated and lived when ~~Christian people like~~ we you and ~~me~~ learn, ~~in the name~~ of Jesus Christ, to touch each other and all men.

Amen.

Our father, we are grateful for the fact that Jesus Christ touched an untouchable. We are grateful for the knowledge that his grace and love and power touch us. Help us, O God, to stand with each other, sensitive to the needs of others, reflecting the love you have expressed to us. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.